

## Advocacy in conflict: "half-truths" on behalf of the powerful?



Does contemporary western activism speak truth to power — or half-truths on behalf of the powerful? These questions were the subject of a recent seminar on *Advocacy in Conflict* hosted by the [World Peace Foundation \(WP\)](#) at Tufts University.

The WP seminar eschewed the traditional conference format of presentations followed by Q&A in favour of frank discussions among a small number of expert participants, "with the goal of generating new avenues of insight and query." Among the two days of proceedings, [JSRP Research Director](#) and WP Executive Director Alex de Waal moderated a panel with [Rony Brauman](#), Director of Research at Doctors without Borders; [Laura Seay](#), Assistant Professor of Political Science at Morehouse College and blogger at [Texas in Africa](#); and [Amanda Taub](#), Adjunct Professor of International Law and Human Rights at Fordham University and blogger at [Wronging Rights](#).

"We didn't mince words" says WP Research Director Bridget Conley-Zilkic of the seminar's briefing summary, [available in full on the Reinventing Peace blog](#). With activism case studies of Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza and Uganda, *Advocacy in Conflict* explored how campaigns portray complex situations, their impact on conflict and foreign policy, and the ethical questions of their legitimacy and accountability. Excerpts from the seminar's briefing summary are below.

On the difference between charity and political activism:

... while charity is a depoliticizing activity, stripping political agency away from its beneficiaries, political activism should be an exercise in the political empowerment of subjects.

On the illusory successes of western policy change:

A theme that recurred throughout the seminar was the distinction between two kinds of activism: one, principled solidarity with the people affected, pursuing solutions that they themselves define; and two, advocacy for a U.S. (or other western nation) policy response, that frequently defines success in terms of adopting a policy, rather than resolving the situation in the country concerned.

[...] Led by groups such as the Enough Project, "activism" has been redesigned as an entirely domestic endeavor: changing policies in western capitals by mobilizing constituencies around celebrities and publicity. Success is measured by the extent to which advocates can convince a domestic population that simple actions they can take will produce fundamental change in distant conflict-ridden places.

... activists must be careful not to equate obtaining a tool (a legal measure such as a convention) with success in solving the problem (which requires a deeper shift in morality and behavior, and more resources).

On who gets "empowered" by media and celebrity-driven activism:

Through highly-produced multimedia products, celebrity spokespersons, and simplified narratives, a new set of practices is developing. Invariably, the answers these campaigns propose are framed as apolitical: clothed in ethical absolutes, impervious to critique, and challenging to the activist's own government only to the extent that it is called upon to do more. The message is one of empowerment—but the empowerment of a domestic constituency, consisting of people not affected by conflict.

[...] Activism defined as solidarity with demands articulated by a conflict-affected population is an honorable commitment. But another term is needed to describe publicity-based awareness campaigns to give American youth a transient and likely illusory sense of empowerment.

On "rescue narratives" vs local experience:

... international NGOs along with western policymakers and the media, have established a dominant human rights framework with an attendant narrative of rescue from evil that has become internalized among many local actors as well. This is particularly the case where those local actors are relatively powerless and lack self-confidence, so they may cling to foreign explanations of their plight, setting aside their own deeper understandings. Local actors' expectations and demands may follow accordingly.

[...] The greater the distance between the activist and the concerned community, and the greater the discrepancy in power and profile between the two, the more important it is for the activist to ensure that he or she is truly supportive of the agenda of the concerned people and accountable to them.

The entire *Advocacy in Conflict* briefing summary is available [here](#). Kate Cronin-Furman of Wronging Rights also wrote about the seminar, with a focus on "evidence and conflict", [here](#).



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## Comments

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